

Open-door policy: Churches worth visiting

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue

Michael Crosbie's article on church design in this issue takes readers on quick visits to several churches. It reminded me of my own love of church buildings. I can recall every physical detail of my early experience of church: the impressive wood paneling, the way the dim light from the organ console glowed through the green cloth covering the pipes, the stained-glass portrait of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the feel of the scratchy pew cushions, and even the smell of the place.

I love the great cathedrals of Europe, and the churches in Italy that reveal the wondrous marriage of Christianity and the Renaissance. Florence alone has half a dozen superb churches which express the essence of several centuries of religious, social and cultural history. In Orvieto, the spectacular facade of the Duomo displays, from top to bottom, an intricately carved bas-relief of the Last Judgment, with marble figures writhing in agony as they are stuffed down into hell by a frightening team of hard-working devils. You can learn a lot about the church of the Middle Ages by looking at those figures.

In Italy every village has a church that is always open and that always reveals something significant—a deteriorating fresco of St. Catherine of Siena, or a lovely crucifix, or freshly cut flowers. In numerous village churches last year I saw displays of children's paintings created during Pope John Paul II's declining days. They were sweet expressions of love for *il Papa*, adorned with flowers, trees and birds. I was as moved by their pictures as I was by the magnificent architecture.

Crosbie mentions Old St. Patrick's in Chicago, a church with a storied history. Today it has a very creative ministry with young adults, including the World's Largest Block Party. Old St. Pat's ministry also has a distinctly ecumenical touch. Some of its members and members of the congregation I serve are currently on a peace pilgrimage together in Northern Ireland.

Roman Catholic churches keep their doors open all day. Most Protestant churches, it seems, are locked up tight. Do we think an open door is an invitation to trouble? Maybe the best thing churches could do would be to fling open their doors and see who comes in.